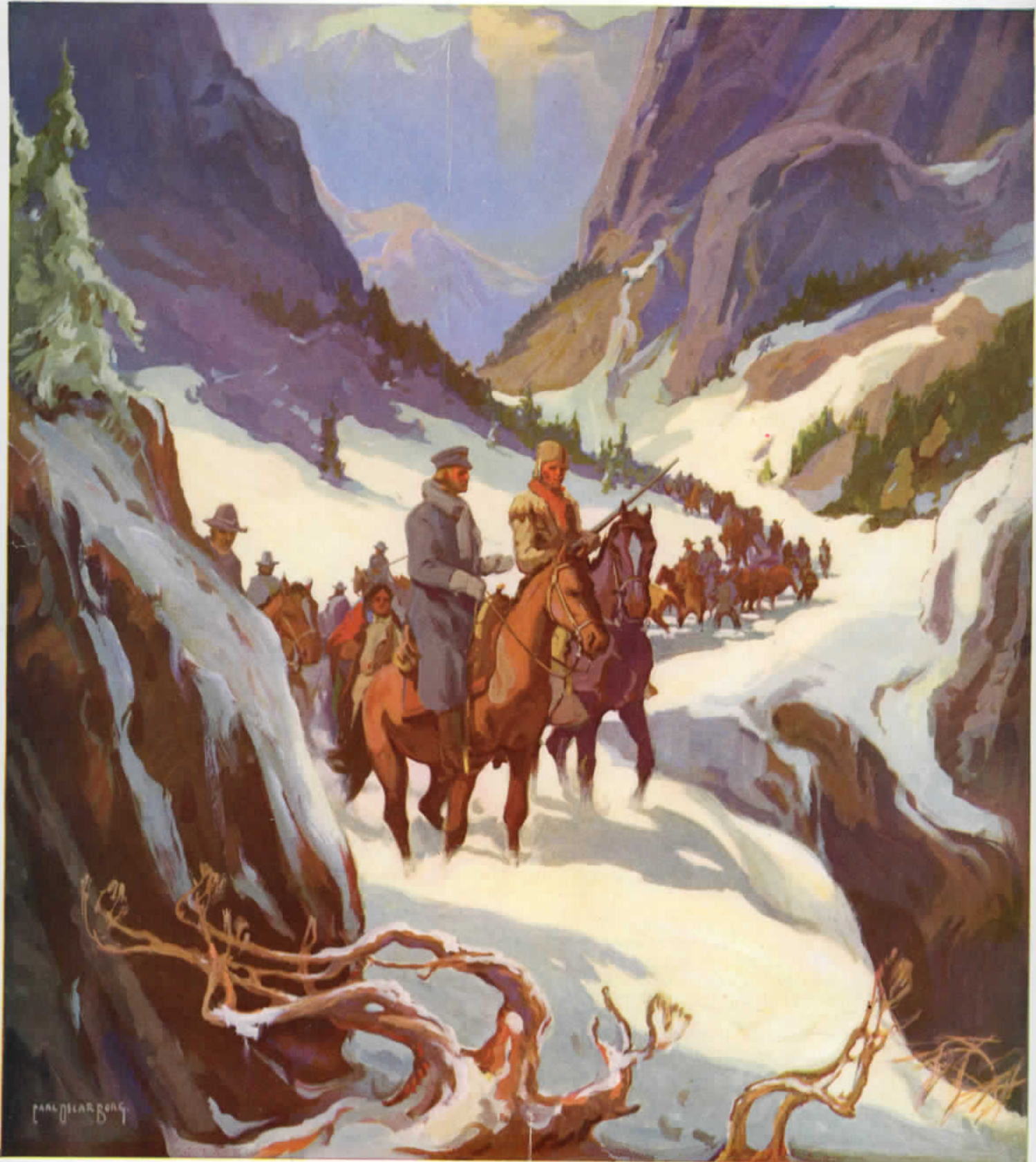


# TOURING TOPICS

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## *Fremont Crosses the Sierra*

### **IN THIS ISSUE**

*Vistas of the Southwest from the Lithographer's Plate*

*Saints in the Sea      One Among the Wise Men      Uncle Nate of Palomar*

*The Pursuits of a Museum Collector*

# SAINTS *in the* SEA

*Deserts and mountains, with their widely divergent flora and fauna, captivate visitors to Southern California's small but interesting Channel Islands*

**By H. H. SHELDON**

**R**OMANTIC outposts of the picturesque shores of California, the channel, or Santa Barbara Islands, are composed of two groups which lie off the coast, distant from the mainland from twenty to seventy-five miles. The southern group comprises Santa Catalina, San Clemente, Santa Barbara and San Nicolás. Those to the north are Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel, San Nicolás being the farthest removed while Anacapa is the nearest to the mainland, some twenty miles from the city of Ventura.

If we may accept the theories advanced by geologists, these islands, supposedly peaks of a sunken land, were once integral

with the mainland a matter of millions of years ago during the tertiary or quaternary period. However, their present geological status is somewhat mystifying and presents problems for science to solve as to their origin.

The land animals that have survived through the ages present a striking example of survival of the fitter and display many interesting points in comparison to similar races of the mainland. There are but six native varieties known—a diminutive gray fox, spotted skunk, white-footed mouse, harvest mouse and ground squirrel.

Equally interesting for comparative study are the resident forms of birds

which, not being so confined by food and environmental conditions, are more abundant in variety, there being about thirty resident birds, ten of which are native and have been separated as differing more or less from similar forms of the mainland. The birds, particularly of species indigenous to the Islands will no doubt continue to thrive long after the animal life has become extinct, chiefly because of the abundance of food. The birds of land, shore, and marshland number about 150 species and subspecies. In addition there are a great number of water birds breeding on the islands and migrating thereto which swells the list to about 220 forms.

*Where Portesuelo Creek spreads out to meet the sea at Prisoner's Harbor, giant eucalyptus trees stand sentinel, on Santa Cruz Island*





The climate differs from that of the mainland, with more humidity and less rainfall, the fogs being responsible for the greater humidity, while the isolation from the mountain ranges is the reason for less rain. In general the islands have a picturesque beauty, presenting both a desert and boreal aspect. Some of them are luxuriant with plant life and offer a picture of tranquility, while others are desolately barren and

*Right—A fishing fleet drops anchor at Willow Cove—the open seaside of Santa Cruz Island*

*Below—The end of a 200-pound wild boar. These wild hogs are a menace to the island ranch, doing considerable damage to the vineyards*



almost eternally windswept, with ponderous waves smashing and changing the contour of their rugged shoreline.

The flora, in many instances, differs from closely related varieties of the mainland and several distinct species are native to the islands. Three varieties of cactus are more or less conspicuous over the arid sections. The most prolific is the *Opuntia* or fruit cactus, which, in many localities where the exposure is southern is so abundant as to present a decidedly desert-like appearance to the landscape, while on slopes exposed to the north and at higher altitudes, considerable areas are forested with pines much like similar zones in the

high mountain ranges of the mainland.

Because of the similarity of most of the islands in respect to flora and fauna, I shall tell chiefly of Santa Cruz and San Nicolás islands, the most diversified of the Santa Barbara group, and the most interesting as to plant life, birds and animals as well as historically.

Twenty-one miles from the port of Santa Barbara lies Santa Cruz, the larg-

est and most beautiful of all the islands. It is twenty-four miles long, with an average width of about six miles and contains 63,000 acres. Its highest peak, Mt. Diablo, is 2407 feet above the sea, while several others of equally striking formation and prominence closely approach this height. The formation of this main chain of mountains is volcanic. The ridges are spectacular with their barren though rugged shapes and rich, burnt coloring. Water is comparatively plentiful, many small streams having their sources from springs in the wooded sections. There are three distinct forest areas of pines and in some instances, in the deep canyons with northern expos-

ure these pines are more than one hundred feet high and beautifully festooned with Spanish moss.

In the warm valleys and lower, undulating hills, the live oak holds sway with intervening patches of *opuntia* cactus always in evidence with its gaudy array of scarlet fruit, in high favor as a food with the foxes and mice and many species of birds. The breasts of the "mockers" are often so stained as to give this sombre colored bird an exotic appearance. The *opuntia* fruit is delectable to man, though difficult to eat on account of the spines.

Of the native trees the ironwood or *palo ferro* is the most conspicuous for its size and beauty. It is a thin-leaved, hardwood evergreen, somewhat resembling the pepperwood, though not so thickly limbed.

The California holly or red berry grows considerably larger than on the mainland with larger and deeper-hued berries. In fact, most species of plant life akin to the mainland forms attain a larger size, both in height, fruit and flower, while with the animal life there is a tendency toward the opposite, with one exception and that in the case of the Santa Cruz Island jay—a bird almost identical in color pattern to the species of the mainland yet noticeably larger.

The little gray fox averages about four and one-half pounds or about half the size of the closely related gray fox of the mainland. However, in respect to the fox, the smaller size can be attributed chiefly to ages of inbreeding over a restricted area.

It is quite probable that the jay has

descended from a large race occurring to the south. It is one of the oddities of the island life. Its distribution is restricted entirely to this strip of land and it is unknown on the other islands, though Santa Rosa Island, not unsuitable as an habitat, is but seven miles to the west.

Jays are not migratory birds nor are they known to fly long distances, but there are some birds seemingly less fitted for flight than the jay which have been taken on the islands, having migrated from the mainland. For instance, the writer secured a Virginia Rail on Santa Cruz Island last year (as far as known, the first occurrence of the species ever visiting the Channel Islands). The rail is a weak winged bird, spending most of its life on its legs.

The Dusky Warbler, a mite of a bird, breeds on some of the islands and sojourns to the mainland for the winter. The nesting season is much earlier, as a rule, on the islands, for some of the birds commence building nests as early as February.

**F**OXES are mainly carnivorous animals, though the island fox has become insectivorous, despite the fact that mice are abundant over the entire island, not to mention a variety of ground dwelling birds, such as sparrows and thrushes. The variety and abundance of insect life on the islands is an important factor in the habits of the fox. Because of this insect diet the foxes of the islands are diurnal of habit as well as nocturnal. I have often seen them out in broad daylight turning

over stones and searching through the grass for beetles, grubs, potato bugs and a variety of other insects, a sight rarely seen in the habitat of the fox of the mainland which, like all other foxes of the genus, are almost strictly nocturnal.

The fox is an outstanding example of the "survival of the fittest." It would seem that in ages past the islands had their quota of animal life, quite probable many more species, at least, than exist at present. The fox, the skunk, and the mouse, it appears, were better able to adapt themselves to the changes that took place, and to outlive their ancient four-footed kin, which long since passed to extinction.

In the winter of 1928-1929, the writer collected thirty of these foxes for research study. At this time they had reached the peak of production. Many of the specimens taken were blind from a disease, which Dame Nature has no doubt used many times before, to depopulate the hordes that overwhelm the land. Toward the end of my stay on this

island, I failed to see a fox or even to catch one. The disease germ had spread rapidly and was taking its toll of a species of animal life which had no chance to escape by extending its range. It is known that the Santa Cruz Island fox has withstood the ravages of this disease in times past, but when a race of animals is confined to a restricted area such as this, with such a degenerating influence occurring periodically, it is only a matter of time when it will disappear entirely—dying, so to speak, within itself.

An example of degeneration is prominently displayed in the wild hogs that frequent the more inaccessible parts of the



*Above—Nature in balancing over-population has produced a blind species of fox on Santa Cruz Island*

*Left—The grandeur of this land and seascape was enhanced by the coloring of a Santa Cruz sunset*



island. They originated, according to a dubious tradition, at an early date when Santa Cruz Island was populated by a penal colony, transported there by the Spaniards. The prisoners were left on the island to fare for themselves with a certain number of cattle and hogs. Apparently, however, the island life grew monotonous to the prisoners who made rafts and escaped to the mainland. The cattle were probably killed off for their hides for making

rawhide thongs with which to bind the rafts, while the hogs took to the hills and waxed fat on the abundance of acorns and other food good for swine. However, another and more plausible account of the origin of the wild boars of Santa Cruz was related to me by Mrs. Jane Kimberly, wife of Captain Martin Kimberly, a celebrated pioneer of the Channel Islands. In the early '50s, Captain Kimberly purchased some thoroughbred hogs in San Francisco with the idea of ranching them on Santa Cruz Island. After taking up his abode on the island and increasing his herd of swine he suddenly left for the coast of Japan to engage in the trade of otter hunt-

eral, it is a savage looking creature and a decidedly formidable opponent when brought to bay; especially when the animal happens to be a mature boar, possessing long knife edged tusks that cut like daggers. Never fat, a large boar will weigh about 200 pounds, and the young ones, up to fifty pounds, are delicious in flavor.

The mammals of the sea are not the least interesting. There are three varieties of seals residing on the islands, two of which are found on Santa Cruz, namely, the Leopard or Harbor Seal and the California Sea Lion. The big Stellar Sea Lion which in the males attains a weight of about 2000 pounds makes its home on the

bleak and wind blown rocks of San Miguel Island. Here is one of the breeding grounds of this lion of the sea (the name referring to their color rather than their courage, for they will always retreat before man). While at this island, I suddenly came upon a half dozen big bulls, sound asleep and apparently not dreaming of intrusion upon their

wild retreat, where not even a fisherman would have cause to buck the heavy seas that lash and pound their sanctuary. I crept up to within a few feet of one old fellow and yelled almost in his ear. The wild confusion that followed was most spectacular. They came into action with a bound toward the sea, heads turned back to glimpse the foe and mouths wide open, belching hoarse growls of defiance in their retreat and worming their way to the foaming breakers, into which they plunged, to at once become the personification of grace and power.

**A**T Santa Cruz Island, one of the habitats of the California sea lion is situated in a grotto of the sea—a tremendous cave, the end of which has not yet been discovered. To venture into this subterranean cavern affords a thrill to the most blasé, especially when there is anything of a ground swell to the ocean. With the aid of a skiff and a couple of extra hands to manipulate the torches, I paid my first visit to this unusual dwelling site of the seals. We entered on the crest of a swell and were soon lost in total darkness. The coal oil torches lighted the inky blackness for a short distance only but served our purpose well enough. After we had penetrated for about fifty yards, the sea lions became aware of our intrusion and then the din of barking and bellowing seemed to shake the dripping walls. Each bark had its echo that rolled and roared through the

(Continued on Page 36)



*Above—This raven is the backguard of the islands. The raucous cry of this thief, scavenger, and murderer is always in the air*

*Right—All of the channel islands are extremely mountainous. This impressive view is from crest on Santa Cruz*

ing in which incidentally he gained considerable wealth. Many of the hogs had strayed to the wilderness and were left to run wild unmolested.

The restricted range and the inbreeding that followed, has caused the domestic animal to revert to a form of their wild ancestors. Hence, we find on Santa Cruz, a high-withered, long-haired beast, with a head tremendously out of proportion to its body which slopes off to small rangy hams. In gen-





# Saints in the Sea

(Continued from Page 15)

blackness, accompanied by a terrific booming caused by the suction of the receding waters as they left the mouth of the cave. Several heads bobbed in the weird light of our torches and we discovered that a squadron of seals had dared to investigate the oncoming skiff. The rookery was approached and we were showered as the animals hit the water all about us after diving from their lofty sleeping quarters. The little boat rocked like a cradle as the barking, snorting herd plunged all about us in the blackness of earth and ocean, presenting a combination of sensations still quite vivid to memory. From this very place are taken many of the seals that perform in circuses, only the females being used for exhibition.

Sea otters, now practically extinct, were once abundant in the waters of the Channel Islands where they frequented the great kelp beds and rocky shores. Captain Kimberly, formerly referred to, engaged in the business of otter hunting here in the '50s. His method of hunting them was unique in that he was not only a crack shot but knew the habits of the animals so well as to be able to follow their course with uncanny directness. When they came to the surface for air a head shot with an old "Kentucky" rifle rewarded him a pelt which at that time brought the hunter \$25. Today when a sea otter's skin does get into the market, it brings a price ranging from a thousand dollars upward.

An all night ride in a plunging launch from Santa Cruz brought me to the island of forbidding aspect—San Nicolás. The sea has its lanes of rough water and this island hap-

pens to be in the rough. Hulks of ships that had come to grief on its treacherous reefs loomed in the

misty spray of booming combers. Immaculate gulls flew from their rocky habitat to cry unwelcome

notes which blended weirdly with the wind that hummed in the rigging. I was finally beached with my outfit for a three weeks stay. I learned much about San Nicolás in the three weeks, but still more when my captain failed to return for me on schedule. I've been in the desert sans water, in mountains without food, but to be on a wilderness island and run out of cigarettes . . . How I got back is another story, but to be brief I hailed a fisherman, with a dish towel, and my frantic signals were answered.

San Nicolás is ten miles long from point to point with an average width of three and one-half miles. It is of sand- and limestone formation which has been whipped by wind and rain until its face has been cut to ribbons of eroded soil. A picture more desolate I had never seen unless it was the Dakota "badlands." Countless shells of abalones and other denizens of the deep are strewn about, indicating the former dwelling sites of Indians who once made this island their home. History tells of the Aleutian islanders migrating to this island to trade in otter pelts. They all but annihilated the Indians who once dwelled here peacefully. The winds of the years have bared the tragedy and today there are many sections where quantities of human bones are exposed—mute testimony of the slaughter that took place. Some of the women were spared and were later taken from the island by the fathers of Santa Barbara Mission. They have long since passed from the picture of island life and their skeletons and artifacts are all that is left to tell of the island inhabitants that vanished with the white man's coming.

